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SUBJECT: HELMAND'S NOW ZAD CHALLENGE: WHAT'S NEXT?

Classified By: PRT and Sub-National Governance Director Valerie C. Fowler for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: State Rep to the Second Marine Expeditionary Brigade (2d MEB) visited Now Zad district over a three-day period in mid-July. The area was once home to Helmand's second largest city and famous for its pomegranates and lush orchards. British units saw past heavy fighting in Now Zad city; more recently, Marines have faced-off in the now-abandoned town center against Taliban fighters, including a stretch referred to as "Pakistan Alley." Plans are underway to interdict Taliban routes into the city and an adjacent mountain pass, with an eye toward creating a stable enough environment for introduction of government and eventual return of residents. Local elders cautioned that lasting security could only be brought by Afghan forces. Now Zad is emblematic of our challenge in pursuing tactical operations in Helmand alongside current strategic limitations -- principally, the lack of Afghan security forces, stretched government capacity, and time. END SUMMARY.

SETTING: IEDs IN "SHERWOOD FOREST"

12. (C) Now Zad city has largely been abandoned since Taliban forces and subsequent fighting drove away most residents over the past several years. Its central bazaar, located next to a remote Marine Forward Operating Base (FOB), is almost Fallujah-like in appearance: packs of dogs (an aggressive breed native to Now Zad) roam the streets, dead trees dot the fields and structures stand abandoned amid piles of rubble. The city is now filled with IEDs, including in now-dead orchards called "Sherwood Forest" and across other locales like "Pakistan alley" (an area infiltrated by at least some Taliban fighters of Pakistani origin). COMMENT: The sheer number of IEDs would require a significant effort to remove them prior to any sizable return of civilians. END COMMENT.

CHALLENGE: MORE THAN A BLOOD FEUD?

13. (C) An estimated 100-200 Taliban insurgents have taken root in parts of the city's outlying areas -- a number matched by a Marine company being tested by Now Zad's signature casualty: double amputations of lower limbs from IEDs placed throughout foot patrol areas, with units led by Marine engineers holding hand-held mine sweepers in single file. Since 2d MEB's arrival, several Marines have been killed and more wounded. The Marine presence has kept the Taliban from expanding their zone of influence; however, the absence of ANSF units has limited the Marine company's ability to interdict Taliban routes more widely. Recently, Taliban have fired upon Marine helicopters landing near the FOB.

¶4. (C) In a series of conversations in an outlying area next to Now Zad's city center, displaced residents told State Rep that a quick introduction of Afghan forces into the area would be essential to bring security. Some criticized outright the presence of U.S. Marines, fearing increased fighting; others, however, said Marine units needed to act as a security bridge until ANSF arrived)- and stayed.

¶5. (U) Key comments include the following (verbatim) points made by about a dozen elders and one mullah. (NOTE: Notably, they invited State Rep and some Marines inside a mosque compound to discuss their security and other concerns, but it was clear that their comments were constrained due to visible anxiety about Taliban influence and the likely presence of informants within the larger group. One teenager pointed to a person in the crowd and said he was there "to listen to what we say"; another youth (unsuccessfully) tried to grab an interpreter's pistol at the end of the conversation -- unclear as to his intent. END NOTE):

Elders and mullah (gathered near a water well and inside a mosque compound):

-- "We will be very happy if our Afghan forces come here. Too many of you will not be good. We need security here before anything else. We will talk to our forces; it is easier to cooperate with them."

-- "Why are you destroying us, bringing so many Marines in?"

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-- "There will not be much voting because no one is in charge here; no ANP or ANA -- and it will be hard for us to travel to vote."

-- "The Taliban will get even stricter if more of you come and there is more fighting."

-- "The Taliban hurt us; you don't."

-- "We have heard about your President Obama from the radio. We see him differently. He spoke in Cairo." (NOTE: the residents said several families had radios, with people listening to programs for news. Radios remain the item most requested from civilians and Marines.)

-- "We are like rocks here; you kick us, the Taliban kick us, no one listens to us; no one will give us our freedom."

-- "Where is the government? There is no government."

-- "We need to see Afghan security forces, but Marines should not leave until they are here."

-- "I remember as a child when Americans visited Now Zad to eat our pomegranates."

-- "Now our children are illiterate. No schools are open."

-- "There are not a lot of Taliban here, but they are active." (NOTE: when asked, one elder estimated the number of Taliban to be between 100-200 individuals.)

WHAT'S NEXT?

¶6. (C) 2d MEB has begun planning for the insertion of additional U.S. and some Afghan forces into the Now Zad area, with the principal aim to interdict a mountain pass adjacent to Now Zad city. Closing the route should inhibit movement of Taliban. Initial plans for providing support to polling

sites for displaced residents was originally opposed by the IEC head in Lashkar Gah, who told our PRT officers recently that there is "no district governor, no ANSF and no people in Now Zad." Afghan counter-narcotics police have been identified for Now Zad, but the duration of their stay there remains unclear.

¶7. (C) Governor Mangal has recently taken a more active role in guiding how the operation should unfold, and he has likened the potential in Now Zad to the effort in Kanashin, the southernmost point of government and U.S. Marine presence in Helmand.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Now Zad is perhaps Helmand's most symbolic city, the scene of a disproportionately high casualty rate for Marines. That said, the city does not presently measure up to other areas in terms of inherent strategic importance (for example, Nawa or Garmsir and, eventually, Marjah). The reintroduction of Now Zad's dislocated population to the IED-filled city would require significant follow-on resources after any successful additional Marine-ANSF interdiction operation.

¶9. (C) Now Zad highlights how smaller Marine "anchors" (outside the central Helmand River Valley's "green zone" population centers) will continue to compete for Afghan government attention in any sustained way. Overcoming Now Zad's long-term challenges should realistically be based on a timeline measured in years, not months)- and only if Afghan officials prioritize their own efforts in the area. Governor Mangal's recent willingness to direct provincial officials' eyes toward Now Zad is a good first step. The key indicator of counter-insurgency traction in the area, however, will heavily depend on whether ANSF are kept in place (and increasingly take the lead) so that a lasting local government interface can be established.
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